Kosovo

NATO makes divide worse

KOSOVO'S THIRD largest city, Mitrovice, has erupted in violence between Serbs and Albanians.

NATO secretary general George Robertson and most Western commentators have blamed the Serb inhabitants of Mitrovice, in northern Kosovo, for the renewed fighting.

But the sharpened ethnic conflict is a direct result of NATO's 78 day bombing campaign in the Balkans last year and the eight month old occupation.

The current outbreak of fighting in the city began on 2 February.

A group of Albanians fired a rocket at a bus carrying Serbs, killing two old age pensioners.

The day after, two Albanians were shot dead and grenade attacks on two Serb-run cafes injured 25 people.

A gang of Serbs attacked Albanians in a block of flats a few days later. Ten Albanians were killed and 1,500 left their homes in the north of the city as a result.

Two weeks later 60,000 Albanians marched on Mitrovice and tried to break into the Serb area.

NATO commanders portrayed themselves as stuck between two warring sides. But murderous divisions between Serbs and Albanians in Mitrovice have been encouraged by NATO's actions.

Mitrovice used to be a mixed city. An Albanian majority lived alongside Serbs, Roma Gypsies and other minorities.

Pretext

The Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic discriminated against the Albanian majority in Kosovo throughout the 1990s.

NATO's bombing campaign last year provided the pretext and the cover for Serbian paramilitary forces to drive hundreds of thousands of Albanians from their homes.

Then, when NATO occupied Kosovo in June, the Serbs were driven from their homes. Albanians returned to the city. Some set upon the Serbs and other minorities, forcing them to flee.

At the height of the war George Robertson, then the British secretary of state for defence, said his aim in Kosovo was "NATO in, Albanians back, Serbs out."

Albanian gangs set fire to the Roma Gypsy quarter of Mitrovice.

Mitrovice's Serbs either left Kosovo altogether or clustered in the north of the city. Albanians occupied the south.

The river Ibar separated 9,000 Serbs from 90,000 Albanians.

The "ethnic cleansing" against Serbs is a mirror image of what Serbian paramilitaries inflicted on Albanians during the war.

The 60,000 Albanians who marched on the Serb enclave in Mitrovice last week chanted, "Mitrovice is the heart of Kosovo."

Last year Serbian nationalists who wanted to keep hold of Kosovo by force raised the slogan, "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia."

Mitrovice—and indeed Kosovo as a whole—has become an embarrassment for NATO leaders.

> "The sharpened ethnic conflict is a direct result of NATO's bombing campaign"

They said they would rebuild a "multi-ethnic Kosovo". But over half the pre-war Serb population has been forced to leave.

It is little wonder why.

NATO knew that none of the Serb minority would feel protected by the forces that had just bombed them.

Western governments have set up their own administration in Kosovo. It excludes Albanians and Serbs from decision making and resembles a colonial government.

Hundreds of millions of pounds promised by the West for reconstruction in Kosovo has not arrived.

NATO is making up for that with a policy of divide and rule.

During the war it allied with the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

KLA units have attacked Serb civilians. Rival leaders are now trying to get control of lucrative posts in the West's administration.

Former KLA fighters dominate the Kosovo Protection Corps. Not one Serb is a member.

Plight

NATO is working with Albanian forces who want to drive the remaining Serbs out of Kosovo.

But it is trying to preserve the pretence of a multi-ethnic state.

So it simultaneously boosts those who are attacking Serbs and is forced to confront them.

Milosevic is using the plight of the Serbs of Mitrovice to boost support in Kosovo, Serbia and neighbouring Montenegro. The sanctions the West imposed on Serbia have strengthened his hand.

Former KLA commanders are launching attacks inside south eastern Serbia. NATO commanders fear the fighting in Mitrovice could trigger a wider conflict.

Bill Clinton and Tony Blair promised NATO's action would bring peace to Kosovo.

***Socialist Worker* predicted that the war would deepen divisions, lead to new waves of ethnic cleansing and unleash further fighting which could spread across the Balkans. Events in Mitrovice are tragically confirming those predictions.**

Satpal Ram—in jail for 14 years

'PRISON MADE ME A REVOLUTIONARY'

SATPAL RAM is the victim of one of the longest running cases of injustice in Britain today. He is entering his fourteenth year in jail.

Satpal says, "Even though we've had the Lawrence inquiry no one is looking at those victims of institutional racism who are in Britain's prisons because of racist police and courts."

***HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE* visited Satpal to talk to him about his case and his politics.**

INJUSTICE HEAPED upon racism has made a revolutionary out of Satpal Ram, despite the best efforts of the British state to crush his spirit.

The Asian from Birmingham has endured countless savage beatings and psychological torture from prison officers.

Since his conviction in 1987 he has been in virtually every prison in Britain. The Home Office has moved him 59 times to date in an effort to break him.

Satpal is now in HMP Full Sutton high security jail outside York.

Yet Satpal is not, and never has been, a danger to anyone.

He continues to be a victim twice over—once at the hands of the racist who attacked him, and secondly at the hands of the racist British state.

Twenty year old Satpal was eating in an Indian restaurant in Lozells, Birmingham, when he was set upon by a gang of racists. He was verbally abused, physically attacked and glassed in the face and arm.

His main attacker died after he refused treatment for two stab wounds struck by a terrified Satpal with the knife he carried for his work as a warehouseman.

Satpal's trial was a gross miscarriage of justice. It took place in the aftermath of the Handsworth "Uprising" of 1985 where local people had fought in the streets against the racist police.

Many in the establishment thought that black people needed to be "taught a lesson".

Satpal was sent down for murder.

When Satpal was sentenced in 1987 he was given a "tariff" of ten years in jail.

When New Labour's Jack Straw became home secretary in 1997 he could have set Satpal's release in motion.

Instead he left Satpal at the mercy of the prison Parole Board.

The board says that Satpal has not been "rehabilitated" because he rightly refuses to admit that he is a murderer. They want to keep Satpal locked up until he admits his "guilt".

Satpal's lawyer Gareth Peirce, who has handled many injustice cases, including the Birmingham Six, is gearing up for a new Parole Board hearing.

Peirce is also submitting evidence to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, set up to re-examine miscarriages of justice.

Satpal is now 34 years old. He says, "There are things I miss from the outside world—fresh air, the ability to walk down the street, to be able to cook a meal."

How he has endured his torment is difficult to comprehend—but he has.

Satpal talks about how it became routine for prison officers to torture him at will, year in, year out.

He tells of ten officers rushing into his cell. He tells of the kicks and stamps, of his hands cuffed behind his back, his body contorted as the blows rained down on him.

He tells of his "four or five years spent in segregation", incarcerated in a room "the size of your bathroom", with no human contact, eating and shitting in the same space, listening to the cries of fellow prisoners being beaten up.

> "At times I have felt very low," Satpal admits. But he has never given up. This defiance should be an inspiration to us all."

"At times I've felt very low," Satpal admits. But he has never given up.

He has used his time to educate himself politically and gather an impressive campaign for justice around him.

"I get 70 or 80 letters a week from all over the world," he says.

"At the moment there are not enough hours in the day, replying to letters and preparing documents."

Left wing bands such as Asian Dub Foundation and Primal Scream have taken up Satpal's cause and visit him regularly.

"Once Bobby from Primal Scream said he was going to visit me and it got in the newspapers. The prison said that he couldn't come.

"So I said, 'If you don't let him visit, I'll get the band to do a gig in the prison car park.'

"They backed down and Bobby visited."

Satpal recounts how prison officers would beat him and then slap a disciplinary charge on him to cover their brutality. Then he would be sent to the prison governor for his "trial"—or "kangaroo court", as he describes it:

"They would say, 'Name and number.'

"'Satpal Ram, E94164.'

"'How do you plead?'

"'I do not recognise this court. I am a political prisoner.'"

The experience has radicalised Satpal. "I'm a changed person. When I was young I was aware of the rise of the National Front in the 70s and the riots, but I wasn't political.

"Now I have a clarity. Prison gives you plenty of time to reflect."

Satpal lists political thinkers he has read—Marx, Che Guevara, the US civil rights leaders, south African black consciousness leader Steve Biko, Malcolm X.

He has a particular admiration for George Jackson, the US Black Panther who was executed by prison guards in San Quentin jail in 1971.

"Mumia Abu-Jamal. You can see why they want to execute him," Satpal says.

"For the first time I have a TV in my cell. I watched the riot in Seattle and I saw a Mumia banner. I thought, 'Yes!'"

Satpal has nothing but contempt for New Labour. "They all said they'd help me in opposition. But now they are in government?" He shrugs his shoulders.

Satpal says that the New Labour government has moved so far to the right "they've abandoned socialism".

For Satpal, Jack Straw is a hypocrite talking about human rights but passing the Asylum Act and trying to scrap the right to a jury trial.

Satpal's defiance should be an inspiration to us all.

"One time a prison officer lowered the flap on my cell and said, 'Go on, hang yourself.'

"'Me, commit suicide?' I said. 'The only suicide I believe in is revolutionary suicide'."

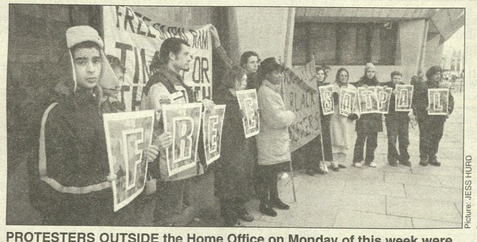
Satpal was referring to the writings of American Black Panther leader Huey P Newton.

Newton wrote in 1968 of his experiences of solitary confinement in a US jail, saying, "Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means the opposite.

"We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible.

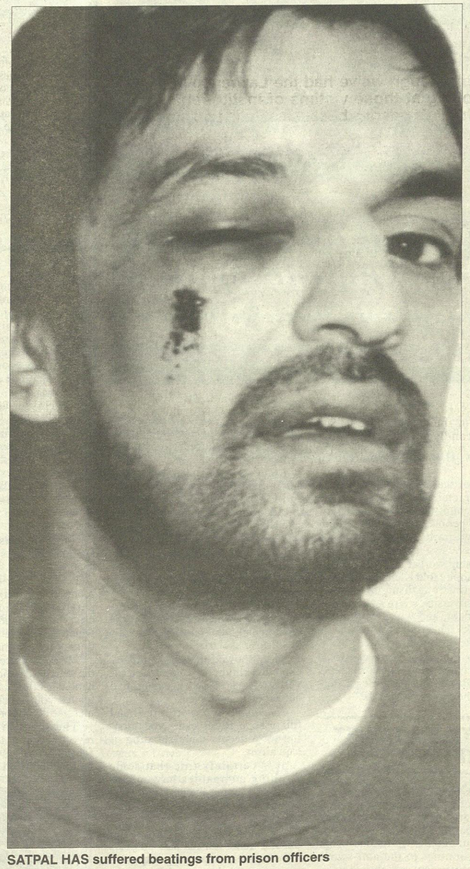
"When reactionary forces crush us we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death."

Satpal's determination meant the prison officer went off with his tail between his legs.



PROTESTERS OUTSIDE the Home Office on Monday of this week were joined by the band ADF

Picture: JESS HURD



SATPAL HAS suffered beatings from prison officers

●Demand the Parole Board release Satpal. Write FAO Usha Prashar, The Parole Board, Abell House, John Islip Street, London SW1P 4LH

●Letters to Satpal Ram E94164, HMP Full Sutton, Moor Lane, Stamford Bridge, York YO41 1PS. Or e-mail him at freesatpalram@ncadc.demon.co.uk

Free Satpal Ram campaign, PO Box 23139, London SE1 1ZU

what do socialists say?

Will we ever end racism?

A NEW poll last week showed that social attitudes in Britain have become more anti-racist over the last five years.

For example, it found that 53 percent of people thought most white people would not mind if a close relative married a black person.

Five years ago just 21 percent of people said they would not mind.

The poll confirmed the findings of other recent surveys, which also show declining racist attitudes.

Home secretary Jack Straw welcomed the poll's findings. But he said that although the level of prejudice could be reduced racism could never be eradicated.

His pessimism is based on the mistaken idea that racism is somehow part of human nature and will always reappear.

However, the fact that, as last week's poll showed, the level of racism in society can go up and down suggests that racist prejudice is not fixed in human nature.

Indeed, racism is a very recent development if you look at the history of the human species.

It was born with capitalism to justify the enslavement of millions of Africans who laboured on the plantations.

Slave labour provided the profits for the growth of industry.

Of course, other forms of oppression have existed in other class societies. But they were not based on inherited characteristics such as skin colour.

From the beginning racism played a crucial role for the capitalist system. It encouraged white servants to identify with their masters rather than with black slaves.

That divide and rule tactic continues to keep racism going today.

Capitalism has developed unevenly across the globe. Each burst of growth has depended on people uprooting themselves and moving to another part of the world to satisfy the demand for labour.

The US grew through mass immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

British capitalism depended on immigration in the 1950s and 1960s.

This immigration has a contradictory effect.

It provides the basis for overcoming racist superstitions. Britain is far more integrated today than in the 1950s.

For example, there are more mixed marriages, more young white people identify with black music, and black and white people work and live alongside one another.

Stoke

But scapegoating ideas can also gain a hearing. White workers can be encouraged to blame black workers for the decline of services, rising unemployment or other problems they face.

Workers who came to Britain earlier can blame newer arrivals, often refugees, in the same way.

Such ideas can grow, particularly in periods of economic crisis or when workers do not feel confident to mount a collective fight against their bosses.

So capitalism creates the potential to undermine racism but constantly regenerates it.

Right wing politicians can also deliberately stoke up racism.

The likes of Jack Straw can then cave in to the scapegoating by, for example, passing harsher measures against asylum seekers, reinforcing the idea that recent immigrants into Britain are a problem.

Racist attitudes have declined in Britain because there have been huge, successful battles against racism over the last three decades.

Black and white workers have also united in common struggles against attacks on their living standards from governments and employers. They have confronted institutions, such as the police, which perpetuate racism and division.

But for so long as capitalism exists, workers will be pitted against one another. That provides a seedbed for racist ideas.

If you do not believe there is an alternative to capitalism, then Jack Straw is right—racism is a permanent feature of society.

But there is nothing natural about a society based on grotesque inequality and crazy competition between people.

In a socialist society people would collectively allocate resources to those who need them.

Achieving it requires a united struggle by workers to overthrow the capitalists who exploit them.

That in itself would deal a body blow to racist ideas as workers of all backgrounds see they have more in common with one another than with any group of bosses.

The irrational ideas which seem natural in capitalist society would not all disappear overnight.

But they would rapidly be undermined by the way people would live in a society run in the interests of all.

The whole thrust of society would be for equality and freedom rather than protecting the power of an elite.

Under such circumstances those racist prejudices that remained would be among the first rotten ideas to disappear completely.

by KEVIN OVENDEN

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